

Council's plan to pierce travellers' human shield

❑ Bailiffs can cross and occupy private property
❑ Residents fear reprisals if their land is used

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BASILDON Council has the power to trespass and occupy private land as it gears up for the massive eviction of the district's illegal traveller camps.

Campaigners fighting to keep 86 families at Dale Farm, Crays Hill, hope scaffold barricades and a ring of supporters, likely to include stage and screen star Vanessa Redgrave, will prevent bailiffs and heavy machinery moving on to the site.

Yet the Echo can today reveal the council can target the sites from all directions, crossing privately owned land if it needs to.

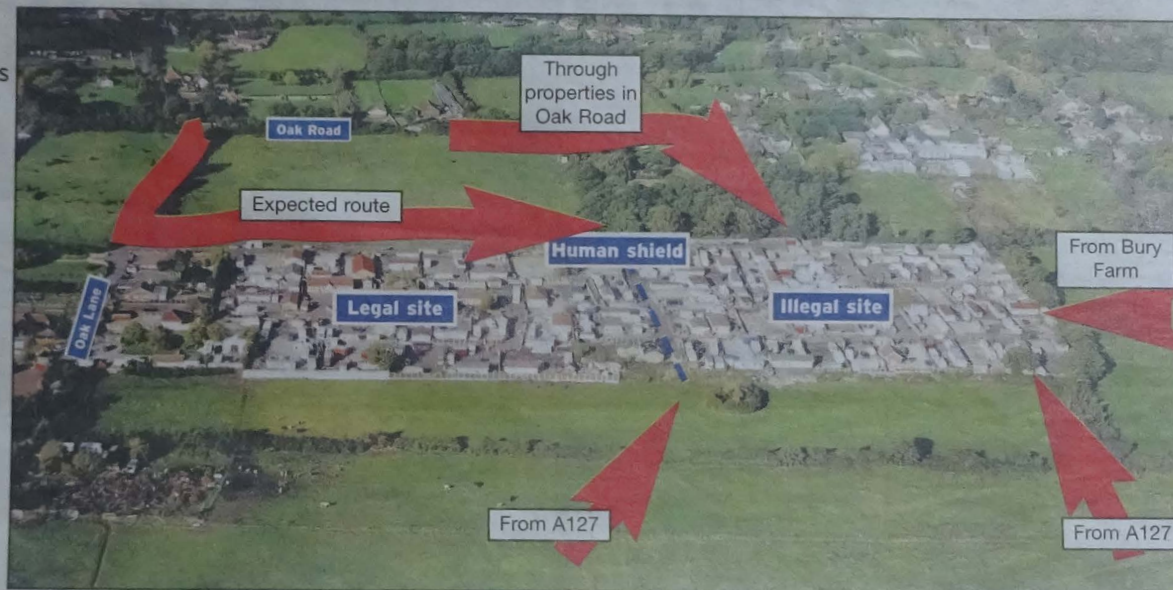
This would allow teams of bailiffs and bulldozers to bypass any barricades formed around camps more easily.

For example, if the Oak Lane entrance was blocked by a human shield then entry could come from the A127 - by crossing fields at Bury Farm - or even through nearby back gardens.

The neighbouring legal site is another option, but the illegal settlers hope travellers there will deny access to and seek injunctions against contractors trying to cross their land.

The "well-being" power was authorised by the council's own legal department and means the authority can occupy or cross private land, using it as a base for vehicles and equipment, for as long as the eviction takes.

A council source said: "The bulldozers could be brought in from any direction. They would need enough people to cover the entire site for a human shield to



■ Eviction plan - the site at Dale Farm and the possible points of entry for the bailiffs

work. The council took out this power so it can cross a third party's land without permission, so they cannot be blamed for aiding the eviction and therefore should not face reprisals."

The decision to use the power was not taken in public, but was signed off by former council leader Malcolm Buckley when he was in charge.

Len Gridley, 50, whose bungalow in Oak Road has plummeted in value from £400,000 to £150,000 because of the neighbouring camp, welcomed the news.

He said: "They could use my place as an HQ as long as they get rid of them."

"This will mean other people who were reluctant because of reprisals will have no choice. Travellers on the legal site won't be able to stop them either. That's good news."

Another resident in Oak Road, who would not be named, said: "We want them gone, but never thought it would involve other people's property."

"This could cause mayhem if they are coming at the site from all directions. It still concerns me, because how would the travellers know who agreed or not."

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Power to protect green belt sites

THE well-being power is a tool allowing councils to take action to improve their district.

The council will use it in this case to maintain its green belt, according to a report into the decision.

It said to do this the council should be able to access private land to help carry out enforcement action over planning breaches, such as the illegal occupation of Dale Farm.

It states: "The solicitor to

the council will not authorise access to land unless such access is reasonably necessary in order to facilitate execution of an enforcement notice."

The existence of the power has only just emerged.

The report says the council will consider the rights of anyone's land it occupies against the European Convention on Human Rights.

It will also compensate anyone who suffers loss or damage to property.